



Ch'an Newsletter

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THE FIVE EYES

(Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, Sunday, December 22, 1985)

Ananda reached an understanding of the limits of perception itself, and so he asked the Buddha how he would be able to know his true nature. The Buddha replied: "Ananda, though you have not yet reached the state beyond the stream of transmigration, you may now use the Buddha's transcendent power to behold the first dhyana heaven without obstruction, like Anirudha who sees this world as clearly as fruit held in his own hand. Bodhisattvas can see hundreds and thousands of worlds. Buddhas in the ten direction can see all the Pure Lands as countless as the dust. As to living beings, their range of sight is (sometimes) limited to inches."

The Buddha explains to Ananda that beings on different levels, although they may look at the same thing, will really see it according to their own perspective. The Buddha then continues to talk about different levels of vision. The Buddha sees all things as equal, undifferentiated, but he can also see things as ordinary beings see them. The Buddha explains how things are perceived from five different levels. They are:

The eye of ordinary sentient beings

The heavenly eye

The eye of an arhat

The eye of a bodhisattva

The eye of the Buddha

The first level, which is also called the "fleshy eye," includes animals and all beings in the realm of desire. This eye can see material things, but it can also be blocked. If a piece of paper is put in front of your eyes, vision is blocked. If the paper is removed, you can see. This eye is quite limited. You can't see things that are too big, too small, too far, too close. The fleshy eye is so weak that it is almost.

There are two kinds of heavenly eyes. First, there is the eye which is achieved only through the practice of meditation by those who have cultivated samadhi and reached the first level of dhyana. Second, there is the eye which is achieved on the basis of accumulated good merit.

An ordinary human being can achieve the heavenly eye through meditation and the achievement of the first level of dhyana, or he can achieve it through the grace of buddhas, bodhisattvas, or heavenly beings. An ordinary human being could not attain the heavenly eye through accumulated merit. One who had enough accumulated merit would already be born in the heavenly realm, not in the human realm.

The arhat eye, also known as the "wisdom eye," is the third level of attainment. It is called the wisdom eye because the arhat has attained wisdom and eliminated all vexations. Those with the fleshy eye or the heavenly eye still have vexations. The sutra says that when an arhat observes this world, he sees it the same way an ordinary being sees a mango in his hand, and he sees it with complete clarity. He cannot only see this world, but he can see a great chilocosm of worlds. Why is his vision so vast? He no longer has a sense of self, therefore the chilocosm is there before him, unobstructed by his own perceptions or interests.

The next kind of eye, the bodhisattva eye, is also called the dharma eye. Why is this eye, and not that of the arhat, called the dharma eye? Even though the arhat has liberated himself from self, or ego, there is still a sense of discrimination between the realms of birth and death. But for the bodhisattva there is neither birth nor death, samsara nor nirvana. He has no attachment to the Dharma, and thus he has the dharma eye.

The arhat can see one great chilocosm, but the bodhisattva can view 100,000 great chilocosms. There is no comparison between the arhat eye and the bodhisattva eye.

The Buddha's vision is the greatest. The Buddha eye can see all the Buddha lands in the ten directions. The Buddha's eye is the most perfect. The way Buddha sees has nothing in common with our ideas of far and near, large and small.

These are the five kinds of eyes. Now we can return to the sutra and ask what kind of problem Ananda was having. He was not an arhat, and he didn't have psychic power or the heavenly eye; he only had a normal human eye. The Buddha appeared in the world not just for bodhisattvas and arhats, but for ordinary sentient beings as well. He explains the Buddha eye to ordinary sentient beings because they tend to believe that what they see is all there is, and that that is right and correct. According to the Buddha's view, there is nothing that is right, nothing that is wrong. If the Buddha and an ordinary sentient being look at the same thing, they both see it, but they each see it differently. When the Buddha looks at something, he sees into its empty nature, its original nature. Common people look at the material nature of things - shape, color, and quality. The Buddha looks at true nature.

In early Chinese literature there was a Taoist philosopher named Chuang-tzu. One day he was talking to another philosopher, Hui Shih, and they were both standing on a bridge overlooking a river. Chuang-tzu said, "Look at the fish, see how happy they are." Hui Shih replied, "You're not a fish - how do you know how happy they are?" Chuang-tzu countered, "You're not me, how do you know that I don't know how happy the fish are?"

These two men had very different perspectives. Chuang-tzu is at one with the fish, and really knows what they are feeling. Hui Shih still discriminates between himself and the fish, so he has no idea how they feel.

There's a Ch'an story concerning two patriarchs, Ma-tzu and Pai-chang. These two masters were walking, when a flock of geese flew over them. The elder patriarch asked Pai-chang, "What was that?" Pai-chang replied, "Those are wild geese." Ma-tzu then asked, "What about now?" And Pai-chang said, "They've flown away." Ma-tzu grabbed Pai-chang's nose, squeezed very hard, and demanded, "They flew away?" Pai-chang's nose really hurt, and he started to cry, but then he started to laugh uproariously. People thought he went crazy.

At the beginning of their walk, when the geese first flew over them, what they saw was different. But at the end of the story they were both seeing the same thing. When Ma-tzu saw the geese, he saw them, as we say in Ch'an, with "no coming, no going, no dying, no being born" - how then could he say that the geese flew away? When Pai-chang first saw the geese, he had the mind of discrimination. When the geese flew away, his mind flew away with them. But when Ma-tzu grabbed Pai-chang's nose, Ma-tzu brought Pai-chang's mind back. When the pain was great enough, Pai-chang was right there again. He saw for himself that he was unmoving, that the geese were unmoving. His tears and his laughter were both expressions of his joy. In the beginning they had different eyes, but in the end their eyes were the same.

The experience of these patriarchs is different from the story of Chang-tzu and Hui Shih. Chang-tzu was at one with nature, but he was still moving with nature. Ma-tzu was also at one with nature, but his mind was not moving, therefore, nature was not moving for him.

In Ch'an we only consider it important to deal with two of the five eyes, the ordinary eye and the Buddha eye. There is no need to bother with the heavenly eye, the wisdom eye, or the Dharma eye. In the gradual school of practice all five eyes would be included. But the sudden school of practice begins with the worldly eye and moves directly to the Buddha eye. This is what Pai-chang did. He moved immediately from the material view to the point where he could see the empty, unmoving nature of all things.

In this sutra the Buddha is trying to help Ananda take the step directly from the fleshy eye to a realization of the Buddha eye. He does not talk about the three stages in between. But since we have some time, I will go more deeply into the differences between the worldly eye, the heavenly eye, and a sub-level called the deva, or ghost eye.

Have you ever seen a ghost or a god? Normally people can't see things that are too far, near, big, or small. But some people borrow the power of a ghost or other spiritual being, and gain spiritual vision. There are also cases of heavenly beings who are born into the human realm, who still retain some ability to see ghosts and spirits in the realms below. They can no longer see into the heavenly realm, nor can they see ghosts and spirits in the human realm.

I had a student who came here for a beginner's class. She claimed to have some psychic power. She said that when she was well-concentrated, she could see into people's past, but I had my doubts. I asked her if she could see into my past. I have heavy karmic obstructions, which have their root in past lives, but still she could see nothing of my past. Why? People are not always reborn into the human realm. They might be born into a distant world, and ordinary psychic power would be too limited to see that far. It would be similar to a person who commits a crime in Taiwan and moves to New York. The New York police would have no record of the crime.

The ghostly or deva eye stands at a level between the fleshy and heavenly eyes. This phenomenon occurs when a spiritual being uses the eye of a human being as a medium. People who have experienced this believe that they have been endowed with great spiritual powers, but it is really the power of the spiritual being at work. There is book about a spirit called Seth who used a woman's body to talk to people in this world. He could only talk through her.

I have a Dharma brother who has such powers. He was once sitting on a train, and suddenly he saw all the people sitting around him as pigs and dogs and other animals. He could see the changes that these people went through in various past lives, but he could see no further. This is not really his power, but that of a spiritual being working through him. I asked him if he could see such things with his eyes closed, and he answered no, but there are people who have such powers.

In the sutra Buddha talks about a disciple, Anirudha. He is a good example of someone who developed the heavenly eye. He practiced very hard. He sat for days with his eyes open, and he never slept. Eventually, he went blind from keeping his eyes open. The Buddha went to visit him and told him not to worry. He said that the fleshy eye is of little use anyway, and there are better eyes to acquire. The Buddha explained to Anirudha how to practice, and in a short time he had the heavenly eye. As he penetrated deeper into dhyana, his vision became truly vast.

Those who are born in the realm of desire with the heavenly eye, because of their previous good karma, are always born in heavenly realms. Those born as humans in the realm of form, must obtain the heavenly eye through meditation. Normally, human beings cannot see ghosts, and the ghosts that are here cannot see us. The more powerful beings in the heavenly realms can see us, but spiritual beings here cannot. They can sense our existence, but they can't tell exactly where we are. Only by borrowing an earthly eye can they see more accurately. An English psychologist who was able to leave his body reported seeing just this sort of thing; he saw ghosts and humans, but they could not see each other.

The heavenly eye can observe all manner of beings in the realm of form: animals, humans, ghosts, spirits, heavenly beings. This eye can see into the past and future for 500 to 1000 lives. But looking into the past and looking into the future are two distinct psychic powers. In the six heavenly realms, the lower realms cannot see into the realms above them. Why? Because the body becomes more and more subtle as you ascend into these realms. A being in the highest heavenly realm can see throughout his realm and all the realms below. Such a being can see us and know us as if we were specks in the palm of his hand.

Common people cannot really understand this heavenly eye. It has to be experienced. Sometimes someone in Canada might be able to see what's going on in the United States, or someone in United States can see things in Hong Kong. This is not the heavenly eye at all. It is still the ghost, or spiritual eye. The heavenly eye, within its realm, knows what is going on in all places at all times.

I'm not going to speak about the arhat eye or the bodhisattva eye. I will speak directly about the Buddha eye. It is really quite simple. The Buddha sees everything as emptiness. This does not mean that he sees nothing when he looks at something or someone. It means that he sees the empty nature of the things he sees. Levels below the Buddha can see emptiness also, but emptiness is experienced like air in a box. It takes the shape of the container. There is still separateness. For the Buddha, according to this analogy, air is everywhere, and it is not segmented. Even the bodhisattva, who has the dharma eye, does not see in this way. Only when you reach Buddhahood, do you see with unobstructed limitlessness.

The Buddha explains to Ananda that he must see into the true nature of things. In this way he will see his own true nature. This is what the Ch'an sect calls "seeing into your own true nature." But this can be somewhat misleading, because it might sound as if your true nature is something separate from yourself. That is not the case. Your true nature is your self; it is not apart from it. This is why the Surangama Sutra is classified as a sutra of true permanence - because leads us to our true nature.

***** NEWS ITEMS *****

Shih-fu returned to New York on October 10, 1987, and he was full of amazing stories of the three months he spent in Taiwan. One of the most significant event was the official recognition of the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies of Taiwan, Shih-fu serves as President.

We have moved out of the 'old' building on October 29, 1987. The new building is not yet finished but already it's looking **VERY GOOD**. A lot of people came on the first Sunday Service held in the new center, and there were many new faces. We hope to see our center flourish in our new environment. Even the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas statues look happy in their new places.

Shih-fu will be out-of-town from November 17 to 21. He will be lecturing at Butler University in Indianapolis, the University of Illinois and the University of Iowa respectively. For more information of these lectures, please contact:

- Indianapolis - Dan Stevenson (317) 925-3726
- Iowa - Li-ping Chuang (319) 353-4706

Our Thanksgiving retreat starts on Thursday, November 27, 7:00 p.m. and ends on Thursday, December 3, 1987. The Christmas retreat is from Friday, December 25 to January 1, 1988. The cost is still \$60.00 for members and \$120.00 for non-members. Please register early.

A Beginner's Meditation Class will be held on Saturday, December 5, 1987. The cost is \$40.00. Please contact us to register.

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